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ABSTRACT

The majority of college English departments in America identify and categorize their writing courses by genre. Because of this, writing instruction as a field represents teaching interests and results in written products that are diverse enough to suggest that departments should hire writing specialists who have equally diverse credentials in the different genres of specialized writing fields, such as technical writing, creative writing, and business writing. The result of such specialization is problematic. Current course descriptions in writing tend to prohibit diverse writing experiences by defining courses narrowly by genre. Some students are exempted from the first year writing course, crucial in its coverage of rhetorical skills and process writing. Also, teachers of these genre writing courses tend to become over-specialized in order to be closely identified with their specialty. While genre division of writing instruction has proven practical, a genre focus has hidden the commonality of writing processes, suggesting that it may be time to rethink these teaching categories. It is faulty to assume that students in different fields benefit only from instruction in genres associated with those fields. Writing classes can break the composition/creative writing barrier and include instruction in both modes simultaneously. In short, writing courses should aim at emphasizing writing commonalities, process instruction, and genre experimentation. Further, teacher comments suggest other avenues for useful changes of direction in writing instruction. Designing exotic, exciting new courses of writing may provide a welcome boost of energy in a field that many teachers would rather avoid. (Fifteen references are attached.) (HB)

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Paper presented at the ADE/MLA Panel: "Common Ground? The Teaching of Composition, Creative Writing, and Technical Writing." National Council of Teachers of English, 82nd national convention, November 20-23, 1992, Louisville, KY.

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Genre as "Field Coverage"--Divisions in Writing Instruction Erase Our Common Ground

The majority of college English Departments in America identify and categorize their writing courses by genre. For instance, most universities have required first-year composition sequences of two semesters (some limit the requirement to one semester while others place the second semester in the sophomore or junior year). English composition in this manifestation is a course defined by its products; first-year writing is generally viewed by university administrators as a service course and instruction should result in a set of student themes or expository essays. At the same schools, creative writing courses are offered. The number of these offerings increases dramatically each year, for creative writing has proven to be a popular humanities elective on most campuses. Creative writing courses are in turn subdivided by genre--poetry, fiction, drama, the more occasional literary non-fiction or two genre course. At the same schools, business, and technical, and advanced expository and advanced literary nonfiction may be severely circumscribed, filling different course requirements for different student constituencies.

Writing instruction, as a field then, represents teaching interests and results in written products that are diverse enough to suggest departments should hire a staff of writing

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specialists who have equally diverse teaching credentials. And in fact, ads in the MLA job list call for technical writing instructors, professors prepared to work in programs supporting document design, Writing Program directors, creative writers, undergraduate composition teachers, specialists in literary non-fiction, and so on. To a degree, these department hires begin to look more like department hires in English literature than ever before. In literature, remember, discussions about a new faculty hire will focus on whether there is a department need for a Renaissance specialist (prose and poetry or just the plays, early or late?) and 20th century British novel professor (post-colonial or postmodern?). In a similar "field coverage" manner, course offerings in writing have multiplied, and, as they do, so do the apparent separations between the genre offerings in our departments, where a technical writing expert would--we tend to imagine--make an unlikely teacher of poetry writing while those proficient in desk-top publishing and document design might not be welcome as a Writing Program Administrator (although just about anyone is welcome to be a Writing Program Administrator in my experience).

This may seem like a review of obvious and familiar territory, but I want to point out some problematic results of these developments. First, our current course descriptions in writing tend to "prohibit" diverse writing experiences by defining courses narrowly by genre; that is, a course in literary nonfiction, presumably, would contain no poetry writing, and so on. Undergraduate writing majors tend to exempt first-year writing which often overviews rhetorical theory

broadly and introduces process instruction, both research and practice. These majors may skip over these important courses and then spend the bulk of their schooling moving among discreetly taught and often not co-contributing genre courses. And such genre courses may be designed, as any course might, more to reflect the personal and academic history of the professor rather than a writing program's articulated view of instruction. Second, when this happens, students are limited but so are teachers since strong expectations are placed on faculty members to produce writing in "their" genre and identify with that area of the field of writing primarily, by attending specialized conferences, reading mainly technical writing journals or literary magazines, and so on.

I believe that these common ways of organizing writing courses--whether they developed through historical/institutional inheritance, accretion, and/or sheer accident (see Berlin and Murphy for some of that history and examine your own departments for accretion and accidents)--help us to ably define "teachable" semester-sized chunks and provide some semblance of "content" mastery which again resembles what happens in traditional literary specialties. Material to cover in technical writing might be the project analysis, memo, timeline, oral presentation, and so on; in short story writing, scene, plot, point of view, dialog, must be covered and mastered. And just as literary studies is under critique for its "field coverage models" of literary periods (see Graff Professing), there are problems for writing instruction when we separate our teaching areas so firmly, particularly in the way separations clearly

valorize some products and types of writing instruction over others.

There is no doubt that dividing writing instruction into smaller and smaller slices has proven practical: there is much to be said about genre skills in each slice. However, a genre and utility focus in our curriculum has erased or hidden the commonality in writing processes in all our teaching. It has been much easier to say what doesn't belong in a specific course than to say what does belong in all courses (or perhaps we simplistically take it for granted that all good writing teachers teach X Y Z). I think it is time to rethink our teaching categories and reconceptualize our instruction just as many in Literary Studies are rethinking "field coverage" today.

These points are fairly simple to present and support. However, although I'm quite sure of our need for change, I'm less clear how needed changes might be supported. Equally, I want to be forceful but not present a simple change-for-the-sake-of-change argument. So I have to say a little bit more about why current divisions aren't working for me.

At many schools where I've taught, first year writing programs aren't allowed to elicit writing in a variety of genres from students much less to experiment with genres, audiences, and formats. Generally, including creative writing in composition classrooms is not sanctioned nor are the majority of composition teachers comfortable teaching it, imagining it takes the special skills of the published creative writer, an assumption creative writers have an investment in fostering.

I can think of a developmental and a functional reason for this. Within English departments, canonized poetry and prose are the most venerable of texts and first-year writers are deemed inadequate to undertake "artistic" composition, particularly if, or when, these students are not fluent at producing standard academic English prose (see Scholes). Outside English departments, faculty members and administrators are less worried about literary texts and more about literacy; it is commonly assumed that First-Year Writing Programs are teaching some highly stylized yet indefinable academic literacy that every department on campus has nothing to do with except to know we should be teaching it for them, even while they seem sure we've never managed to do this teaching well.

Additionally, we assume students in different fields benefit only from instruction in the genres we typically associate with those fields. Engineers have nothing to do with poetry writing, we're quick to predict, and then go on to insist that they should focus on technical writing, envisioned as a dry, mechanical, routinized form of purely instrumental communication. We might require the philosophy student to immerse herself in abstract and logical argument not in clear journalistic prose writing or the play of metaphor.

Of course I'm evoking stereotypes and myths to some degree with my examples. And it is clearly possible to dispell those stereotypes and myths within our own writing classes. Several years ago, at the last minute, I was asked to teach a technical writing classes where we covered portions of the department-

ordered, 100th edition, Famous Technical Writing Textbook and undertook conventional, prescribed paper assignments, but we also shared drafts in workshops, presentations and portfolios, creating an unusual-for-that-time process-oriented technical writing course (see Bishop "Revising"). More recently, in advanced composition classes, I highlight risk-taking and experimentation to help student writers move into professional writing identities. On a late-in-the-semester paper, I ask students to undertake a "radical" revision of an earlier paper (the revision should explore writing in such a dramatically different way that it is likely to fail as a final product) and to share a process analysis for this revision journey. It is necessary to remove the grade penalty for failure by focusing on the process-analysis and self-evaluation and by sharing this risky and experimental piece in a class portfolio. Then, I find, students start to use "creative" thinking to reconsider the traditional essay form within the composition class (see Bishop "Writing").

In a similar way, first-year writing classes at my university often break the composition/creative writing barrier and include instruction in essayistic and poetic genres, exploring issues of nonfiction and fiction overlaps and allowing students to generate writing self-assignments through invention and drafting. As Director of First-Year Writing, I've supported a program drift that was already in progress when I took over because the creative writing courses I teach include, intentionally, metalinguistic exercises and meta-analytic

reports on the process of writing, as well as attention to genre constraints and exploration to understand the benefits of breaking with convention. Such a curriculum brings, I hope, the best of composition pedagogy to the creative writing workshop; I've tried to describe this movement in Released into Language.

In short, my writing courses--no matter what they're called in the college catalog--are now emphasizing writing commonalities, process instruction, genre experimentation for comparisons, if not just for a break, and obviously, I'm teaching more similarly in all these courses than I would have expected to when I started teaching seventeen years ago and read the descriptions for courses I was then being assigned.

I've started looking beyond my classroom, too, for hints of what might be accomplished, for I realize that my suggestions in this essay still rely on genre as an organizing principle even within these suggested rebellions. Winston Weather's book Grammars of Style has been influential for me, suggesting a rhetoric of style as a possible center for a writing classroom. Peter Elbow, while continuing to develop his classroom theories, explains that he is experimenting with "judgement-free zones" as one important way of assuring that student writers and teachers like the writing that is undertaken (see "Judging"). And of course, more than twenty years ago, Elbow offered another influential critique of the writing classroom in Writing without Teachers.

More recently, in Textbook, Robert Scholes, Nancy Comley and Gregory Ulmer develop a curriculum that focuses on common

elements of literary language--metaphor, narration, and intertextuality. In an essay published in the October 1992 issue of College Composition and Communication, Lillian Bridwell-Bowles draws on her readings in feminist theory to examine the benefits of what happens in a writing class she teaches that focuses on "diverse discourses." These include personal/emotional writing, writing that breaks the boundaries of textual space, language play, writing that toys with academic writing and risks challenging conventions.

Gerald Graff in a paper titled "Organizing the Conflicts in the Curriculum," presented at the 1992 Summer Institute for Teachers of Literature, suggests that students in different classrooms meet in the 5th, 8th and 11th week of classes and "hold a series of multicourse symposia" (see also Beyond the Culture Wars). He suggests that all students share readings of selected common texts. There is no reason cross-course conferences couldn't work well for writing courses in different genres and/or work to better unite reading and writing focused courses within English departments. This symposia model would work extremely well, it seems to me, in writing across the disciplines programs as well. I find that the idea of symposium makes me wonder why we haven't as a profession held conferences more directly focused on innovative curriculums and teaching, really talking about what does and what could go on in our classrooms, offering us windows into the writing classes of the expert writing teachers we all know.

Since I have neither the funds nor energy to put on a

conference myself, I've spent some time recently asking teachers what they think a real re-vision of writing instruction might look like. And, of course, we need to ask also what in our selves, our teaching, our institutions resists such re-visioning, for clearly there are macro-problems in instituting change although there is also great possibility for micro-management: grassroots change within the curriculums we teach eventually gives us the courage and expertise to influence general course descriptions and program requirements. There's a movie that I read about though I haven't yet seen it. Actress Diane Keaton wanted to know what people think, when they think about Heaven. She interviewed a set of individuals and turned their answers into her film. I felt rather like this when I asked writing teachers what they envisioned when they tried to describe a very different writing curriculum (or at least ones that would attend to some of the problems I've raised in this essay).

Here's what one teacher said:

> If I lived in an unrestricted academic universe, I would teach (assign) poems, stories, prose poems, autobiographical/exploratory essays. No grades. Just writing and freewheeling, reading. They would have to read a lot and react to it, summarize it, write about it, but it would be wide open. This unrestricted academic universe will not exist, though, not because of the genre questions you raise but because the buffer between corporations and university has completely

> disappeared, almost completely, so that there is enormous pressure to teach students to write serviceable, employable writing. And where that pressure doesn't exist, there is pressure from our colleagues to teach students to write competent sanitized, "error-free" academic prose, "the employable prose" of the university. Ideally, first and second year writing should be implicitly subversive of the corporation and the university. It should be the wild forest of the curriculum where students leap into the mysteries of language and existence, where they are encouraged to write and read hard, certainly, to work, but not to "labor" the way they do now. I'd have them do a lot of collaborative, ensemble writing, too: build essay quilts, rap and hip hop lyrics, ethnography of the university they are attending, gonzo journalism about their cities, their own subcultures, underground newspapers. How frightening this would be to everyone except the students!

I've taken the liberty of assuming that discussions regarding curricular change should be provocative, and I hope this one has been so. I want to serve our writing students as well as this teacher dreams of doing in his re-visioning of writing instruction. I take pleasure in agreeing that writing <u>is</u> a subversive activity. And I argue that writing courses have content--language, mystery, the wild forest of the curriculum,

the ethnography of self, city, and academy. If we turned out more courses like this and like the ones other writing teachers are dreaming of right now, wouldn't everyone be in line to take and to teach them? For me, that would be heaven.

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